

# **CROSSING THE BORDER**

An Expositional Study of Colossians

by GUY H. KING

CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CRUSADE Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **HIS TACTFUL APPROACH 1:1-2**

- 1. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother,**
- 2. To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"**

MANY writers have adopted the form of letters to express themselves - among the ancients there was Cicero, at a later time there was Erasmus, and coming on there were Thomas Gray, Horace Walpole, William Cowper, Charles Lamb and Sir Walter Scott; and there was Samuel Rutherford, who wrote his from prison; and right down to writers of our present time - and so many others in between.

This ministry of letter writing was much used in the Early Church, and, as we know, the New Testament contains no less than twenty of them - we feel that Hebrews is more of a treatise than a letter. More -than half of these letters were written by Paul. We speak humanly, for we do not forget that behind him is the inspiring HOLY SPIRIT - "**words . . . which the Holy Ghost teacheth**", as he says in I Corinthians 2:13.

Isn't it interesting that GOD uses this method, as so many other methods, to convey His truth to human minds? I sometimes wonder why it is not employed more by Christian people, especially by shy folk who find it so difficult to speak about the things of GOD, but who could, perhaps, by prayerful tact write to another about things that matter most - perchance a simple testimony to what the Saviour means to the writer, and what He could, and would, mean to the reader. Who shall measure what such a ministry might accomplish in His Name.

Well now, here is the great apostle engaged upon his correspondence. Can you not almost hear him as he dictates sentence by sentence - some of the sentences, by the way, so long that, as in Ephesians, the full stops are almost a rarity. He certainly did dictate his letters, as, for instance, we observe in Romans 16:22, "**I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle**". I wonder what the Roman guard thought as he listened to the inspired words - perhaps these very words were part of the means whereby Paul was able to lead some of the soldiers "**that kept him**", Acts 28:16, to CHRIST, these "**saints in Caesar's household**", as Philippians 4:22 describes them.

Though the letters were dictated, it seems that, in concluding, the apostle would take the pen in his own hand, and write a few words of personal salutation. "**The salutation of Paul with mine**

**own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write"**, II Thessalonians 3:17; I Corinthians 16:21. How pathetically he remarks, "**See how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand**", Galatians 6:11 - was that because of bad eyesight, which some think was his "**thorn in the flesh**", II Corinthians 12:7? - and what about that other poignant reference at the end of this very Epistle that we are to study together, "**The salutation by the hand of me, Paul. Remember my bonds**", Colossians 4:18?

Why that last phrase? Was it just that he begged them to remember before GOD his irksome captivity? I think not. Bear in mind that he is bound at the wrist to a Roman soldier, and so he makes but a poor fist at his handwriting. I suggest that he offers this as an excuse for his perhaps illegible signature. Thus, then, we overhear him dictating to his amanuensis. Did Tychicus take it down in shorthand?

A form of shorthand was practised among the Greeks, before CHRIST, and among the Latins of Cicero's day, 60 B.C. Sir Isaac Pitman was not the inventor of the art, though the introducer of a most useful method.

But now, the missive has reached its destination, and on one Lord's Day, as the church at Colossae is assembled for worship, someone rises, and announces, "We have a letter from our beloved brother Paul".

Would that not create an excited stir? It is thought that Paul was not the human founder of this church, writing as he was to these "**many as have not seen my face in the flesh**", Colossians 2:1, but it is evident that he was well-known to them, and highly esteemed among them. Indeed, Epaphras, the reputed founder, Colossians 1:7, was at the very time of Paul's writing at Rome, Colossians 4:12-13, seemingly to consult the apostle concerning certain false teaching that was being promulgated among the church members. This heresy is dealt with at large in the course of the Epistle.

In fact, we may say that the theme of the Epistle is "**The Church**". Dr. Graham Scroggie adds that the keyword is "**Fulness**" - all that the Church needs is in CHRIST. And I see that Dr. Campbell Morgan divides up the main part of the Epistle into

(a) The Glorious CHRIST and His Church: Provision, and

(b) The Church and her glorious CHRIST: Possession.

Be it so; and for ourselves, we proceed to our more detailed examination of the letter, which we might think of as an essay in Learning by Correspondence, and we begin with Paul's lesson in tactful approach.

### **THE SUBTLE REFERENCE TO HIS AUTHORITY**

He doesn't throw his weight about, as he was so well entitled to do; but he just throws in, almost casually, the fact that he is "**an apostle**", as if to remind his hearers that, in what he has to say, he speaks with all the authority that his important position gives him.

But does he legitimately belong to "**this apostleship**", Acts 1:25? Some people consider that Peter proceeded precipitously in moving to the election of Matthias in the place of Judas. They advance the argument that to settle the matter by "**lot**" was wrong, seeing that in the Christian age the HOLY SPIRIT should have been their guide.

But we remember that He had not yet been given to the Church at Pentecost; and, in any case, He was as able to lead by lot as He had done in past ages in "**the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord**", Proverbs 16:33.

Another objection is that Matthias is never heard of again; but is Lebbeus, or Simon Zelotes? Anyhow, the suggestion that Peter made a mistake is evidently not shared by the Early Church herself, since the number of the apostolate seems to have been officially regarded as complete again after the election of Matthias - see Acts 6:2, "**Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them.**"

Of course, if Paul had been intended to become a member of the original band, there was another vacancy on the death of James, Acts 12:2; but in reality he does not appear to have been eligible for the post, inasmuch as he did not fulfil the conditions, "**men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us**", Acts 1:21.

It is interesting to recall that Barnabas is linked with Paul as an apostle, in Acts 14:14.

Notwithstanding all that has been said, there is no doubt, or question, of the reality and authority of Paul's apostleship. In the controversial Epistle to the Galatians he finds it incumbent to state the fact of his position, for he is to deal weighty blows on behalf of the truth. So he declares himself as "**an apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father**", Galatians 1:1.

Not that he boasted of the privilege, but ever held it in deepest humility, and profoundest gratitude, "**as one born out of due time, for I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle . . .**" I Corinthians 15:8-9.

Great men are, at heart, humble men; and true humility is of great value in the sight of GOD. Says I Peter 5:5, "**Be clothed with humility, for God giveth grace to the humble**". The thought of Paul's innate humility in the face of his high office leads one to think that perhaps there is no limit to what GOD can do with us if only we are humble enough! Many Christian careers have served to underline that feeling.

When, in Romans 11:13, Paul speaks of himself as "**the apostle of the Gentiles**", he adds, "**I magnify mine office**", but he doesn't magnify himself. Well - Paul makes here but gentle use of his claim to be an apostle. It is part of his tactful approach to his readers. And here is a further instance of the same -

### **THE DELICATE ALLUSION TO HIS READERS**

He calls them "**saints**", 2. The word in itself has no moral or ethical connotation, but simply means, *set apart*.

- We speak of a church as a holy place - not that there is anything special about its brick and stone and wood, except that it is set apart for the worship of GOD.

- We speak of the Bible as a holy book - not that there is anything particular about its pages or binding, except that it is set apart for the conveyance to man of the inspired message of GOD.

- We speak of the sacramental element as holy bread - not that it is in any sense different from ordinary bread, except that it is set apart in the service to be a reminder to us of the broken body of the crucified Son of GOD.

In just that sense the Christian becomes, as it were automatically, a saint, a holy person - he is set apart from the company of ordinary people, set apart for GOD. Only, unlike our illustrative objects mentioned above, he is a sentient being, a personality. They can only be holy in use, and can never be changed in themselves, but he can proceed from being merely holy in position to being holy in condition.

That is, of course, the Justification of the translators of the Authorised Version when, In Romans 1:7, and in I Corinthians 1:2, they add two little words that are not in the Greek. but which they infer to be the intention of the apostle. They render the phrase, not "**called saints**" - which, as we have seen, is an accurate statement of the fact - but, "**called to be saints.**"

In other words we are called to be what we are.

- A soldier must by his bearing and behaviour, live up to his possession.

- A rich man should not belie his resources by living the life of a pauper.

- Christians, too, must live up to their name and resources.

Some "**blaspheme that worthy Name by the which ye are called**", James 2:7, but we must not blaspheme it by any vestige of unworthy character or conduct. By the grace of GOD, are we "**called saints**"? Then, by that same grace, we are "**called to be saints**".

Paul follows this up with a further description -

He calls them "**faithful brethren**", 2. The apostle was always careful about the words he used, and commonly invested even the most usual of them with deep significance. When he says "**brethren**", he means just that - it is not merely formal for him, as it so often is with us.

These Christians are brothers and sisters because they "**are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus**", Galatians 3:26. That basic fact, whatever be our country, clime, or colour, whatever be our denomination, constitutes all Christians as "**brethren**" - whatever our outward differences we are all alike bound together by the tie of our individual family relationship to our Heavenly Father.

But that raises an enquiry in our minds. Are we "**faithful brethren**"? In some human families

there is little evidence of a spirit of fidelity - rancour in the home, selfish purpose of individual interests, no love, no loyalty. Can it be so among the members of the Family of GOD?

Well, what about ourselves? How delightful is that opposite picture of the harmony that should prevail, wherein "**whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it**", I Corinthians 12:26. As the late beloved, epigrammatic Bishop Taylor Smith used to say, "Each for all, and all for each."

While we Christians are to be helpful, so far as we may, to those outside the family, we are to be particularly mindful of the welfare of each other, "**as we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, and especially unto them who are of the household of faith**", Galatians 6:10. "**Learn first to shew piety at home**", says I Timothy 5:4. Our apostle was glad to have evidence among the Colossian believers of family fidelity: loyalty to one another, and loyalty to the one Father.

Timothy, whose name he joins with his own in addressing this letter, was just a "**brother**", who in spite of his delicate health, I Timothy 5:23, remained, through thick and thin, so loyal to his big brother, Paul.

One other thing the apostle says about these Colossian friends of his -

He describes them as "**in Christ**", 2.

Oh yes, I know they were "**at Colossae**" - breathing the fetid atmosphere of this typically pagan city. How could the fair flowers of fidelity and holiness flourish in such a place? Only because they enjoyed the nearer, purer air of being "**in Christ**".

The clever little water beetle is able to live in the muddy bed of the pond because it has the gift of weaving around itself a bubble of air. Thus it takes its own atmosphere down with it. I often invert a "let's pretend" story of a man shipwrecked on a desert island, who, happening to have his fountain pen still in his pocket, decides to write a message on a large island leaf to send to his people.

Having thrown it into the sea, he could then only wait, and hope for the best. But, silly man, the leaf will soon be pulped and the message obliterated by the ocean. Oh, I forgot to mention that on his island he happened to find a bottle with a sealing top. So his SOS reached home, and led to his rescue, because though it was in the sea, it was in the bottle. Yes, although these Christians were in that Colossian sea of iniquity, they were kept safe and saintly because they were "**in Christ**".

It is one of Paul's chief inspired conceptions, so often reiterated through all his correspondence, that we are "**in Him**", "**in the Lord**", "**in Christ**". What amazing privilege and prediction is here! "**Christ in you, the hope of glory**", he says in Colossians 1:27; and now it is the other side of the blessed truth: you in CHRIST, the hope of safety. Before we finish our meditation on this brief opening of the letter, let us look at one more indication of this man's tenderness of approach to these people -

## THE CHARMING NATURE OF HIS GREETINGS

It was said by Dr. Johnson of Oliver Goldsmith that "he touched nothing that he did not adorn". It was in large measure true of our apostle. As we have seen, he used common words, and gave to them their true significance.

He would not lightly have said, "Farewell": he would have meant from his heart, Fare well on the journey.

"Good-bye" would never have been said formally, but in the fundamental sense of it, GOD-be-w'-ye. And now he dictates ordinary words of greeting, but how out-of-the ordinary they sound on his lips.

"Grace" is the Gentile salutation - and to him who was the special apostle of the Gentiles, in token whereof he had adopted his Greek name of "**Paul**", and who was now writing to this Gentile church of Colossae, it was only natural that he should hail them thus in their familiar way. But how much it means!

GOD's attitude as in Ephesians 2:8; GOD's assistance, as in I Corinthians 15:10, GOD's attractiveness, as in Acts 4:33. Since all this is what the word implies, what a wish it is with which to get our fellows: may this all-embracing grace be yours. "**The true grace of God wherein ye stand**", 1 Peter 5:12. Be it noted that in our passage this grace is connected With the first two Persons of the HOLY TRINITY -shall we say that GOD the Father is the source of it and GOD the Son is the channel of it.

"Peace" is the Jewish greeting -

and this man whose natural name was the Hebrew "**Saul**" was ever mindful of his brethren of the elect nation, who in his missionary Journeys always in every city went first to the Jews in their synagogue, and had a deep longing for their eternal welfare, "**Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to GOD for Israel is, that they might be saved**", Romans 10:1. It is only to be expected that he would be happy to use the Israelite salutation - and to use it with all its deep intention.

Look at the word. It is not a surface word, but is concerned with things and conditions underneath. It is not merely a calm spirit when all goes well - that is something easily understandable; but Christian peace is an experience "which passeth all understanding", Philippians 4:7. It can hold the ocean depths of a man's soul at rest when hurricanes disturb the surface of his life. This is veritably a "**peace of God**" which springs from a right relationship to the "**God of peace**", Philippians 4:7, 9.

GOD the Father is the embodiment of it; GOD the Son is the enduement of it. "**This Man shall be the peace**", Micah 5:5. In Old Testament days they had a formal greeting, often embodied in their correspondence - "**Perfect peace, and at such a time**," Ezra vii. 12: it connoted merely, at the present time, without any particular reference to the character of the times; but what significance attaches to it, if we use it in the light of what we have been saying -that we can, even at "such a time", enjoy perfect peace.

So ends Paul's tactful approach to his readers. What a tactful man he was. And how tactful the soul-winner needs to be, lest he put off the very people that he so zealously seeks to win to GOD. Let us only beware that we become so tactful that we do nothing, and say nothing.

"Full salvation! Full salvation!  
Lo, the fountain opened wide,  
Streams through every land and nation  
From the Saviour's wounded side.  
Full salvation!  
Streams an endless crimson tide."

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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